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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the proliferation of videocassette recorders in the United Kingdom, especially England, has altered the terms of all electronic--and possibly cinematic--viewing in that country, with the exception of areas where communal viewing is the dominant practice, where broadcast is the dominant distribution mode, and where cinema is strong enough to reduce the entertainment functions of television. Propositions concerning broadcast television and video as cultural discourses are then presented, and an attempt is made to draw links between the two: (1) television is radically heterogeneous; (2) television manufactures invisibility; (3) television is absent; (4) television is powerless; (5) television has to be produced as an object; (6) with video, television enters the age of mechanical reproduction; (7) videotapes don't talk back; (8) you cannot watch a video for the first time; and (9) video is out of control. It is concluded that video has become the center for the struggle over power in television, and that the aim of television studies should be to intervene in the production of televisual meaning, institutions, and education in order to produce an open, accessible, and democratic media culture that will service the needs of all the people. References are provided in the text. (CGD)

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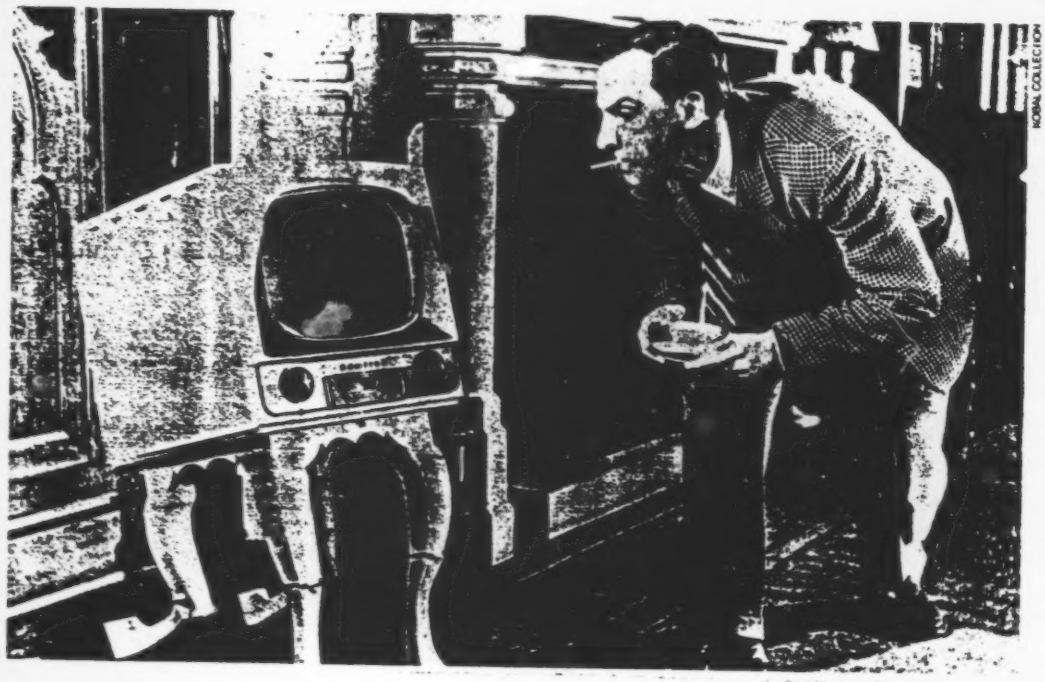
Time Shift

The Specificity of Video Viewing



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Time Shift

The Specificity of Video Viewing

Sean Cubitt

Richard Collins' closing address to the First International Television Studies Conference two years ago posed the question: What is the object of Television Studies? Posed in part at least as a problem of relationships between the literary and sociological origins of the area, and of their various allegiances to both political economy and to semiotics, the question is more than a self criticism of television studies. It is also a fundamental question for the whole sphere of cultural studies, one that problematises the very definition of traditional subject areas. It also reintroduces the question of the political functions of TV studies

Althusser's schema for a materialist science, though open to criticism, offers a useful three part model of the acquisition of knowledge: object of study; problematic; knowledge produced. Crudely stated the object of television studies is described variously as textual or institutional, the problematic as socio-economic analysis or interpretative models, and the resultant knowledges might be even more crudely stated as cultural pessimism or viewer power. Involved in the various models bulldozed into this sketch of the field are the status of the televisual text (segment, programme, flow...), of the TV institution (local, national, global) and relations between the two. And in each of these areas, there is the question of audience: saleable commodity or critical actvivists?

For my contribution to these issues, I would like to begin from local conditions in the United Kingdom, and especially in England, particularly as they relate to the widespread use and ownership of domestic video cassette recorders (VCRs). It is my belief that any generalisations I can make cannot be extended geographically or historically. In particular I would argue that the proliferation of VCRs in this country has altered the terms of all electronic - and possibly cinematic - viewing, but the same is not necessarily the case in areas where, for example, communal viewing is the dominant practice, where broadcast is the dominant distribution mode, and where cinema is strong enough to reduce the entertainment functions of TV. Involved in this disclaimer is the issue of how programmes or formats in world-wide distribution are viewed variously in various cultures. With these provisos, I want to go on to set out some propositions concerning broadcast television and video as cultural discourses and attempt to see what links can be drawn between them.

Broadcast TV

Television is radically heterogeneous. Although, as John Caughie argues, television derives strongly from radio ('Rhetoric, Pleasure and "Art Television" - Dreams of Leaving' in *Screen* v. 22 n. 4, 1980), it also draws on a wealth of other forms: literary, journalistic, filmic, sporting... Likewise its modes of organisation in the UK partake of two classic forms - the regional network of commercial broadcasters based on advertising revenue, and the state-organised, license-financed BBC - and two more unusual ones - Channel Four as 'publisher' of independently produced programming, and the hybrid form of Sianel Pedwar Cymru. Delivery systems are likewise varied: residual 405 as well as the dominant 625 line PAL transmissions; miniature receivers to flat-screen video projectors; co-existence of black-and-white with colour receivers, often in the same home; sound reproduction varying from the sublime (on TV/radio link-ups) to the ridiculous. Television is historically an impure medium. It is, I believe, impossible to say of TV that it is essentially anything.

Television manufactures invisibility. The condition of television showing us anything is that it cannot therefore show us everything. In particular it will not show us its means of production. As institution in a world governed by racism and sexism and plagued with a dismal and outmoded system of exploitation, certain groups and activities will be shown rarely or never. The technology is such that TV cannot show us what is hidden from sight: In Rob Hof's film *Don't Eat Today Or Tomorrow* (Holland, 1985) there is a pan shot of the Geneva skyline, while an on-camera speaker tells us that what is most important in Geneva, the subterranean vaults of the Swiss banks, is what you can't see. If TV produces knowledge, it also produces ignorance. A medium that specialises in giving to non-existent entities (ghosts, wombles, muppets) a local habitation and a name also knowingly speaks to viewers of what it is not permitted to show (Official Secrets). Thus there is also the constant belief that beyond what you know you aren't seeing lies the realm of what you guess you aren't seeing - The Truth. There are entities that do not lend themselves to photography - power or labour for example - which have to be inferred as second-order signifieds, and which provide the basis for more detailed negotiations over the status of truth on television: what one person isn't able to see even if it is on screen but which another finds glaringly obvious (the truth about x). Television's categories of invisibility are necessarily bound up with its production of visibility: the programmes and adverts that we see are the tip of the iceberg of what we don't see - because TV is too all pervasive to be seen *in toto*, because some programmes never get shown, because some programmes never get made. What can be known about television is circumscribed by its partiality: in the global context, in what sense can anyone, or even any one discipline, grasp the whole of broadcasting? And how legitimate is it to specify television as an object of study when it bleeds into other broadcast media so constantly - into radio particularly within broadcast institutions like the BBC and IBA or into print media and film in organisations like Rupert Murdoch's News International? How far can we go in taking audience sampling methods as providers of knowledge? In short it is impossible to know television as a totality. Or to put it another way, there can be no total knowledge about television.

Television is absent. Unlike cinema, the TV image is smaller, less well-defined, often watched in the light rather than the dark, and is generally a domestic or social leisure appliance, so that its messages are in competition with the rest

of domestic or social life. Like that life (or those lives), it is ephemeral in its broadcast form: in the words of a pioneerng essay on TV, it proposes itself as absolute presence, "here and now, for me personally" (Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television: A World in Action' in *Screen* vol. 18 n. 2, Summer 1977, p. 57). Thus the characteristic flow of images noted by Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* is also a support for the ideology of presence. In this sense, one can infer from the ideology of presence the practice of watching for company, especially among heavy media users like the elderly: it is present in the sense that the viewer can enter into dialogue with the screen. Yet the broadcast flow is also a vanishing, a constant disappearing of what has just been shown. And because TV viewing is subject to constant distraction, and because "it would be more accurate to say that television is constituted in a dialectic of segmentation and flow...that television possesses segmentation without closure" (Jane Feuer, 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology' in E Ann Kaplan ed. *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute Monograph Volume 2, University Publications of America, 1983, pp 15 - 16), then viewing is also a process of missing. TV's presence to the viewer is subject to constant flux: it is only intermittently present. The technical composition of the frame itself is a dialectic of constant becoming and constant fading, caught, I like to think, between the anxiety of loss and the desire for an ever-absent completion. In this sense, television is simultaneously already over, and yet to become: it's presence to itself is in question. Following Noel Burch, film theoreticians argue that in cinema the transition from shot to shot is the organising principle of suture: but in television, it seems to me, the transition from segment to segment within the evening's flow is the organising principle of loss of suture, the loss of the subject to the televisual discourse. Television's presence to the subject is itself a problem. Internally and externally, TV is sited, to borrow the title of a recent BBC thriller series, at the edge of darkness. What is it that disappears in channel zapping but the entity television itself?

Television is powerless. Because television is inexhaustible, it is exhausting. It is a cornucopia whose very wealth is its greatest weakness. As Serge Toubiana points out there are always two discourses in television, that of apppearances, of the odds and ends of reality that struggle to appear on the screen, and that of the real, of the machinery and the televisual apparatus. In so far as it deals in appearances, it is open to struggle over meanings; in so far as it partakes of the real, it is transformable. TV is therefore not powerful, but the object in play in a struggle over power. In one direction, television and the discourses about television in the UK have centred recently on the issue of public service, which could be read as the attempt to subject viewers in the mass to the public service. In another is the struggle between the real apparatus and the appearance of reality it carries. "Ce rapport de force", writes Toubiana,"constitue la toile de fond de la télévision: vitrine sociologique en quête de toujours plus de réalité(s), aquarium où défilent des apparences de vie *d'un côté*, principal instrument d'un ministère de la Propagande qui ne s'avoue pas *de l'autre*. A la télévision, la maîtrise est l'objet impossible, l'objet d'un quête infinie: objet petit a." [This relationship of force constitutes the basic canvas of television: sociological window always in search of more reality/ies, aquarium where the appearances of life unfurl *on the one hand*, principal instrument of a Ministry of Propaganda that won't own up *on the other*. In television, power is the impossible object, the object of an infinite quest: object little 'a']. (Serge Toubiana, 'Introduction' in *Cahiers du Cinema: Numero Special = Television* Numero 328, Automne 1981).

Television has to be produced as an object. If in some senses television as discourse produces subject positions from which it is to be understood, yet its own status as originating point of that process is in question. Institutionally, as broadcast flow and as viewing process - even as the object of discourse about television - television is a site of struggle, and one of the stakes in that struggle is the existence of TV as a discrete entity. This is clearly not to argue that TV doesn't exist, but that its existence has to be produced in relation to the subjects which, institutionally and discursively, it is said to produce. If the subject is produced as subject in the television discourse, why should we presume that televsion is not produced as object in the same relationship? I'd argue that the status - ontological, epistemological, political - of television is produced in the individual viewer, in the micro-culture of the living room, in the local, national and global cultures variously, as a kind of ghost, a frightening, comforting, harmless, powerful, informative, debilitating, entertaining, boring matrix of contradiction which has to be believed in in some form before it can take on the aspect of producer of meaning. The unstable dialectic of the real and the apparent, the present and the absent, the visible and the invisible is the condition under which TV enters into the social. The viewing of - and the writing about - television has as a primary function the task of producing TV as an entity. That such a function exists for TV studies is surely proof of the instability of the TV object.

As Marx demonstrates in the 1857 Preface, there is a fundamental problem in attempting to reduce the audience to an undifferentiated mass, one which inflects any subsequent attempt to define the relations around the commodity form: "To regard society as one single subject is...to look at it wrongly, speculatively. With a single subject, production and consumption appear as moments of a single act...In society, however, the producer's relation to the product, once the latter is finished, is an external one, and its return to the subject depends on his relations to other individuals" (*Grundrisse*, ed and trans Martin Nicolaus, Penguin in association with New Left Books, 1973). Relations of distribution and exchange - the relations between production and consumption - are relations of race, class, gender, age and the other factors that overdetermine the divisions in the social formation. They should themselves be understood, not as concrete, self-sufficient entities, but as polarities produced in struggle over ownership, control and meaning. As Marx went on to argue in the first chapter of *Capital*, capital has as one of its effects that relations between people appear as relations between or mediated through objects. Capital produces the object status as a function of its institution of property and class relations. It is in the context of struggle that we have to see the problem of the object status of television. That television exists as an object is so natural an assumption as to appear unquestionable. It is towards the unquestionable that critical studies should always direct their most questioning gaze. The struggle over meaning, the struggle over institutional control, and the struggle in the sphere of discourses about television is also the struggle that places the subject. We should no more countenance a Cartesian object of knowledge than we countenance the unitary, centred and autonomous subject of the *Discourse on Method*. What matters is not the entities between which we fondly imagine relationships, but the relation between them which defines their status. There are no positive terms: we must deal in difference.

Video

With video, television enters the age of mechanical reproduction. Recently the leading Scottish TV and stage dramatist John McGrath wrote: "Drama has lost the quintessential quality of television - that of being an event brought to us as a nation simultaneously. Ten years ago, I think television drama was still primarily created as an event specially tailored for the one-off moment of transmission...This was the quality that made it different from film, and linked it to the heroic unrepeatability of the experience of theatre." ('Strike at the Fiction Factories' in *Edinburgh International Television Festival Magazine* no 10, 1985, pp. 52-3). The aura of live television, the uniqueness, the here-and-now-ness of the broadcast event, is demolished by the use of the VCR, as Jane Feuer observes (op. cit. p. 15). Perhaps it is McGrath's name that gives this quote its particular resonance for me: when I was a student and without a TV, I remember persuading a communal household down the street to watch the televisation of one of McGrath's and British television's most significant drama presentations, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil.* In a basement crowded with the commune and their neighbours we watched and then discussed into the small hours. Communal viewing and live TV are contrasted later in his Edinburgh article with the atomised, 'dead' viewing of video in tones of nostalgia. It is a nostalgia that seems closely related to that of Rousseau and Levi-Strauss as analysed in Derrida's *De la grammatologie*: time-shifting stands in the same relation to 'live' TV as writing does to speech. What underlies McGrath's nostalgia is the acute perception of the presence, the fullness, the self-sufficiency of the broadcast event. Compared to it, videotape appears belated, fragmenting of the audience, incomplete and unsatisfactory. Liveness in a sense serves to mask the fragmentary nature of television, we might argue in reply: videotape forces back onto broadcast its own incompletion. Transparently recorded, video establishes a new relation with the audience, one that alters, I believe, the way we watch now. Because even if you have forgotten to switch on the timer, there is always someone else who may have, the aura of irreplaceability is eliminated - much as Margaret Morse has argued that the 'action replay' alters the viewers relation to 'live' sport ('Sport on Television: Replay and Display' in E. Ann Kaplan ed., op. cit., pp. 48 - 9). TV can cease to be a slave to the metaphysics of presence.

Videotapes don't talk back. If television's characteristic mode of address is the invitation to dialogue (the ubiquitous 'we' of presenter-speak, the 'Thank you for inviting us into your home tonight'), it is so only because of the metaphysics of presence. Time-shifting alters the viewer relation to the shifters: obviously to the referent of 'tonight', but also to the complementary particles 'we', 'us', 'you', 'your'. Presence is the condition of dialogue - I think of the kind of emotional phone-call when after a silence you feel compelled to ask, "Are you still there?". That is the anxiety which video brings to the viewing process. It would be rash to watch a video for company, in the way you might watch TV or listen to the radio. And if Ann Grey's research (elements of which she will be presenting at ITSC 2) has uncovered a guilty viewing of time-shifted tapes among her sample of women viewers in the North of England, surely that is a function of the demise of presence, thus of the contingent quality of 'watching television' as opposed to watching a specific programme, and thus of a complicity between screen and viewer. Video we have to thank for: extending the viewing day, freeing viewers from the tyrrany of the network schedules, freeze framing. fast forward and reverse vision, the chance to go back and forth in a tape and thence to disturb the diegetic hold of broadcast,

the chance to watch in bite-size chunks, and thus for multiplying the available programme formats. But all of these we gain only at the expense of the gamble of solipsism. The removal of broadcast's (mendacious?) 'we' is the condition of entering a different relation with the screen, one which places back on the viewer responsibility for the item viewed and for the uses to which it is put. Because it takes issue with the presence of television, it alters, in terms I am not sure I am capable of articulating fully, the possibilities of identification. How can you identify with a telephone caller?

You cannot watch a video for the first time. Like any recorded medium in Benjamin's age of mechanical reproduction, video shifts out of the omnipresent present. It makes the present contingent on the replication of the past and the plotting of the future. Though video includes TV (in the same way that TV includes film and radio), it does so by reproduction, stealing the aura from TV in order to include within itself the property of infinite repetition. In this sense video joins the other recording media not simply as supplementary memories of events and sensations but as the possibility of their replication. So that we have to see in video viewing that it is always already the repetition of a process that has, for the viewer, no origin, no initial presence, from which to obtain a guarantee of its own authenticity or presence. This property has become an investment: not only can a series, programme or segment be held for study (removing them from that complex and unstable entity 'television'), they can be held for rescheduling across a variety of distribution media in a way that has fundamentally altered the economics of TV production. The balances of power between institutions, texts and viewers are fundamentally altered. Pace Andy Lipman (*Video*, pamphlet to accompany *Video 1, 2, 3* and *The Ghost in the Machine*, Channel 4, 1985, p.3), time has shifted.

Video is out of control. Video began as a surveillance technology with important military input. Broadcasting began as a telecommunications technology with Marconi's transatlantic 'S' in morse code: but it became subject to struggle over the control of telecoms, and was reduced to a monodirectional medium for the most part. Video's surveillance origin brings with it the property of immediate playback. There is nothing natural or essential about these technological variants: they too are produced in struggle, but like many of late capitalism's inventions, they exceed the attempts to control them. In the case of video this has led to the extremely clumsy *Video Recordings Act*, through which government has attempted to make up for the lack of institutional control of the medium by direct legislative intervention. Likewise the current Department of Trade and Industry White Paper on copyright, *Intellectual Property and Innovation*, falls apart when it attempts to account for video recording (HMSO, Cmnd. 9712, April 1986; see especially section 7, paragraphs 3 and 4). What has happened here, why video has managed to become a familiar domestic cultural form without the usual institutional forms that tend to cluster about such innovations, is perhaps to do with the problem of defining, again, what it is. Hardware manufacturers seem to have carried the day thus far, needing a new commodity to sell into the domestic leisure market as television sales and rentals bottomed out. Now they must struggle with software manufacturers, and with the paternalistic elements of the reproductive process in capital - moral campaigners the intelligentsia of the ruling faction of the Tory party. In the moment of claiming to protect children from the most elegant aspect of the technology, its simplicity of use, there is an attempt to control its openness and perhaps also its political possibilities (see my 'Innocence and Manipulation: the Politics of Censorship in the UK' in Alan Tomlinson, ed., *The*

Politics of Consumption, Pluto, 1986, forthcoming). But it would be rash to say that video, because it is beyond normal forms of institutional control, is in the sphere of viewer control. In fact the reach back from video recording to broadcast is now the subject of internal enquiries in both the IBA and the BBC, with a view to restricting broadcast in the interests of controlling time-shift viewing. And the advertisers are worried. Video has made more complex the struggles over media power: it has not annealed them or even shifted the balance, except as a production medium. If current moralist discourses have directed attention to the masturbatory functions of video viewing, they have done so consistently through a broader political involvement in the crisis of the family as institution (in line with other Tory policies to place social care into the 'private' sector). The VCR has entered as a new factor in a strange and at times almost violent new set of circumstances. As Jeremy Tunstall observes, "The VCR is not just a wild card: it seems likely to be a rogue that will deal a whole handful of wild cards, which in turn points towards a very chancy game of poker" (in *Communications Deregulation : The Unleashing of America's Communications Industry*, Blackwell, 1986, p.178). The experience of picking up a camcorder for the first time is one of taking on the mantle of power. It is as yet a relatively rare experience, but it will not be for long. In the meantime, the struggle goes on.

Throughout this section, I have been referring to video as if it were an historical agent. Of course it is itself no such thing. However, though both the technology and the items viewed are heavily over-determined by the whole gamut of socio-political discourses and institutions into which it has had to insert itself, video has become the centre for struggle over power in television (if I can make that leap). I would go so far as to say that the meaning of the technology, and the meaning of video and television viewing, are two of the key sites of cultural struggle in the 1980s in the UK. The video art and community video movements, growing far closer together nowadays, have extended the struggle into production, and the recent arrival of **Network** 21, London's first (pirate) low-power TV station will have its effects in struggles over distribution.

Arguments

Intellectually, the argument seems to me to come down to the status we give television. In the struggles against both left cultural pessimism, and political and moralist attempts to preempt any democraticisation of media control, the object status of TV as practice, institution and text has to be put into play. If we say that we see a film but watch television, and now quite commonly view a tape, there are relations to the object of the gaze that are hinted at in the choice of words. Seeing has a root in physical perception of course, but also in the sense of an understanding derived from sight ('Oh, I see'). Watching has its origin in a time-based activity, the first watch of the night for example, a sense of surveying, of keeping somehow informed but in a distant sort of way. Viewing seems to me to have an even more distant relation, at once formal (reviewing the troops, viewing a house for purchase) and even more inattentive. Perhaps video has enabled TV to take on even more of a Brechtian aspect, making transparent its recordedness, and its openness to change, scattering the elements of diegesis through broken viewing or the reviewing of favourite scenes. From the immense powers of cinema to the negotiated siting of video is a shift from central control which might potentially unleash an entire new culture within the moving image media and beyond. It is only in the light of video that I have been able to make my propositions about television, by reference back through the new technology to see how the old has been altered. Perhaps it has also altered the viewing of films - certainly video is a favourite medium now for feature film distribution and even for study. As production facilities become more and more available, the educational aspects of our work will become more and more crucial: our students or whatever audiences we reach are more and more familiar with programme formats, techniques and practices. Our job should be to demonstrate the contingent nature of the qualities of televsion, to argue that they are open to change, and to investigate in common the potential routes for producing a new media culture. The process of viewing, for example, is already changing - how should we intervene in that? What kind of policies should we be aiming for from any future socialist government, and how should they be instituted? How can we remove power from the paternalist bureaucracies without handing it over to the Berlusconi's and Maxwell's of the world?

I've tried to argue that central to this concern is the question of what television ***is***. If we hypostatize television as an object, if we insist that it is a self-sufficient, autonomous and unchanging essence, we have already lost the battle for change. Television should be conceived of as a field of struggle in which the discourses of TV Studies generally, and this conference in particular, have a role, however minor, to play. To admit that is to take a position in the struggle, rather than simply occupying one. It is a step that both liberates and places in a position of responsibility: the title of the SEFT Education Conference in June this year expresses it well: ***Watching Media Learning***. It is an issue of all the institutions and discourses in which we take place, those we bring to viewing , to talking about TV, and to lobbying on media policy, those which we put at issue by entering consciously into the struggle. In order to do so we have to take the slightly disturbing step of arguing against the existence of television as an entity. For me the most useful statement of the issue is Marx's fundamental insight that "The commodity reflects the social characteristics of man's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things... It is

nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes, [in the commodity form] for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things." (Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, trans Ben Fowkes, Penguin in association with New Left Books, 1976, pp. 164-5). What we have learnt since Marx is that it is not only in relations of production, but in relations of reproduction that social relations are forged: relations of gender, race and age as well as class. But the principle holds good: things are produced in relations of struggle, and they remain caught in those relations even after that in distribution, exchange and consumption. It seems to me that the aim of television studies is in question, not its object: and that that aim should be to intervene in the production of televisual meaning, institutions and education in order to produce an open, accessible and democratic media culture that will serve the needs of all people. This is bound to sound apocalyptic, or utopian, but academic discourse is always political: it is a matter of being conscious of that, and of finding the uses of that discourse for progressive causes. For those of us on the Left, this means eliminating the stranglehold of the givenness of television, starting from what we have to do rather than celebrating what is already there. We have to start from the relations within which this slipping object television is constituted: in Edward Upward's fine phrase, we have no home but the struggle.

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Sean Cubitt
27 April 1986